

Build Bridges, Not Walls

By: Penny Holste

February 5, 2017. In Matthew 5:13-20, Jesus tells us that we're the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In the time of Jesus, salt and light were very important. We're important too. Especially now, with our politics and our communities and country divided more than ever, Jesus urges us not to hide our light. Instead of building walls between us and those with whom we disagree, we should build bridges. We're reminded just how much power God gives us, and in her sermon today Pastor Penny talks about some ways we can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

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I want to start with a word association this morning. If I would say Starbucks, you would say? If I would say McDonald's? Okay, how about Boeing? And Enterprise? Christ Lutheran Church? We have to think, right? What is our product? It's not quite so easy, and it might be different for different people. And you have to think about it. I think that some churches are known for things that they do within their four walls. Good Shepherd Lutheran Church hosts the Feed My Starving Children program, and we've been involved in that. We think of that, maybe, when we think of that church. There are churches that have a community meal. There are churches that might have daycare or a latchkey after school. But I have to believe that what people know about a congregation is not so much what happens here, but what happens outside these walls. I believe that we are the product of Christ Lutheran Church -- that you all are the product. And when you think about how many people (I was asking the children how many people they see) think of the people that we make contact with in one day's time. And then multiply it by all of you. You know that our impact is mostly felt out in the world. We are the product of Christ Lutheran Church.

And Jesus tells us how important we are as a product. He says, You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth. And of course, salt and light are important today. Food would taste pretty bad without a little salt. But in Jesus' day, salt and light were very important. Salt particularly, because it was the way you preserved food. It became a very important trade commodity, salt did, and we get our word salary (like in "earning a salary") from the Latin word for salt, because some Roman soldiers were paid in salt. That's how important it was. Light, of course, is always important. If we didn't have artificial light when the sun went down, we wouldn't get much done. In Jesus' day, when the sun went down they would light little lamps with oil. And it wasn't a very bright light, but it allowed them to go out into the world in safety or to stay home and do what they needed to do safely and securely and with comfort. So when Jesus says you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, he means it is very important.

And it is, and you are. You are these things in your communities. You -- through your words of encouragement, through your faithful work, wherever you work, through your volunteer efforts, through the promises you make and faithfully keep, through the protests or marches you're in or the prayers you pray, when you show patience with a child, when you sacrifice for a friend -- you are the light of the world, the salt of the earth. And you are important. And I think we are especially important right now, because this is a hard time as a nation and as a world community. We know that with each new event that happens in politics, our country is more divided. When we think of the last two weeks under a new administration, I know that a good share of the country is going "Yes!" and a good share of the country is going "No!" And a good share of the country is saying, I don't know what's going on. I'm going to wait and see. We are divided. So it is very much the time that we need to be salt and light.

And I think that's why Jesus urges us in today's gospel not to, he said, let your salt lose its flavor. And I'm not quite sure how to depict that. But he says don't put your light under a bushel basket. Don't hide your light. And I do think it would be easy to do that right now, with all the division in our country. It would be easy to do it by disengaging, by just turning off the news and throwing yourself into your work, into your family, into your hobbies, into the Super Bowl and just saying, I really have no control over this and I don't have that much power. So I'm just not going to bother with it. But Jesus said we do have power. A little bit of salt goes a long way. A little candle, when the power goes out in a storm and you reach for that candle or that flashlight, makes a big difference. A little bit of God's power goes a long way.

In the second lesson, Paul said to his congregation, "I came to you and I didn't have lofty wisdom or lofty words. I was trembling," he said. "But my meager words had power because the Spirit was behind them." In the same way, we may feel powerless. But God says, You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. If we don't disengage, we might be tempted to hide our life in the opposite way. We might accept our power and use it abusively. Instead of disengaging, we might demonize the people we don't agree with. We might demonize the other side. We might eagerly take every negative statement we hear, every stereotype, and began piling these grievances on one another, like we're building a wall, until we've built a wall -- and we can't see through it or beyond it to see the goodness or even the neutrality of people who are on the other side. And when we do that, when we demonize people, what we do is we not only discard their ideas, their political views, but we discard them as people. We stop asking why. Why do they believe differently than I do? What hardships have they experienced in the past that makes them feel the way they do? What good have they experienced that they want to bring back again? Why do they believe the way they do? So clearly, if we are not to hide our light under a bushel basket, if we are not to disengage or demonize, we've got to build bridges and not walls. And that requires us to talk. We have to be willing to listen and to talk to people we don't agree with.

Maybe you saw the news story about the Retired Marine who went around the country, and he'd go to cities and he'd hold a placard that said "I am a Marine and a Muslim. Ask me anything." And people did. When he listened and he talked, I'm sure he learned a lot, and they did too. I said this at first service -- and I'm waiting for someone to take me up on it: I would love it if this congregation could model what that could look like, because I'm sure we have the wide range of political spectrum here in this congregation. If we could model what it would be like to talk about controversial subjects, and do it while we care for each other, what a light we would be to this community, and really to the world. It may be, however, that you just feel that you haven't got the energy to take this on, that you just don't have the strength to fight this fight, to try to listen and to try to speak to people who don't agree with you. And in that case, I think it's important to remember that when Jesus said you are the light of the world and you are the salt of the earth, the "you" in Greek was plural. He meant we as a community are that. Sometimes we need to hold each other up. When one of us gets weary, we need to give each other strength. And that's why we come here on Sunday morning. That's why we worship here. That's why we pray together. We pray for understanding and for wisdom. We pray to have the courage to live out the beliefs that we have. And we pray for people who don't agree with us.

Or maybe you have the strength, but you're just not sure. You're in that middle group and you just don't know what to believe. What is right? What is the right thing to do? What is the right thing to say? Well, we could look at Jesus' life. And he gives us a glimpse of that in the last part of the gospel, where he talks about the law and fulfilling it. We see in Jesus' life that he did not *keep* the law -- he *fulfilled* it. And that sometimes meant breaking the law. Like when he healed people on the Sabbath, or when he ate with the outcasts, the church society said no. No, don't do that. And Jesus said yes, this is the will of

God. Because he knew God, because he had a firm relationship with the Heavenly Father, he knew what God would want him to do in that situation. It's kind of like if you have older children, and parents go out for the evening and the children are on their own, and you have this rule: you say "no friends over." In fact, don't let anybody in for safety's sake. Well if there's a fire, of course they're going to let in the firefighters and they're going to break your commandment. But they're going to fulfill your wishes as parents, because they know we love them, and they know what you would want them to do in that situation. So it all comes down to the relationship we have with God, that we stay close so that we can let God speak to us about how to live out our faith in these separate situations.

It's all about our relationship with God. And you know, our relationship with God is strong. Our relationship with God is solid, not because our faith is so strong or our self-discipline is so strong or our wisdom is so strong, but because God's love for us is unshakable -- so much so that Jesus died to make us what we are. So when it comes right down to it, being the light of the world simply means to be what God has made us to be, to stay close to God, and to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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